Lifting Pottstown’s economic health

In recent columns, we’ve offered a brief survey covering nearly $38 million in grants by the Pottstown Health and Wellness Foundation. The Foundation was created 15 years ago with $80 million in proceeds from the sale of the non-profit Pottstown Memorial Medical Center to a for-profit hospital corporation.

Nearly half the funds given out have been for medical care providers (based on clients’ ability to pay) and to area public and private schools to nurture healthy behaviors in children and youth.

Millions more have been spent on parks and on non-profits whose missions include promoting human health.

In 2015, the Foundation embarked on an effort to improve Pottstown’s economic health with a $160,000 grant to PAID, the Pottstown Area Industrial Development Corporation. PAID is a 501 (c)3 non-profit whose board of directors is headed on a rotating basis by the Pottstown Borough Manager, the Pottstown Superintendent of Schools, and the Montgomery County Economic Development Director. It is supported entirely by donations, and the Foundation promised another $160,000 if PAID could raise a matching amount on its own.

PAID works to attract businesses and developers to Pottstown.

Pottstown is one of the most economically challenged municipalities in southeastern Pennsylvania, with a declining tax base, a high poverty rate, and one of the highest local property tax rates in Pennsylvania.

A grant to the Pottstown Downtown District Authority for a combination outdoor crafts and produce market weekly on High Street is another initiative to encourage economic development.

Perhaps the most unusual economic development grant was $124,000 to the Colebrookdale Railroad Preservation Trust for a station at Memorial Park — to promote tourism.

Given Pottstown’s meager resources, it’s appropriate for the Health and Wellness Foundation to expand its horizons.

But the Foundation can marry economic development to healthy lifestyles to capitalize on Pottstown’s unique infrastructure.

In the suburbs, every trip requires a car. Total car dependency has fostered an adult population that is 70 percent overweight. Retrofitting most townships for walking and bicycling would be almost impossible.

But Pottstown was designed from its inception for walking and biking.

Earlier this year, a contractor installed more than four miles of bike lanes in Pottstown and replaced more than 15,000 square feet of defective sidewalks.

The Foundation provided $500,000 for the engineering. A federal “Transportation Alternatives” grant provided $1.3 million, and Montgomery County kicked in $135,000. That’s a lot of money leveraged.

And the new infrastructure will attract the healthy, vibrant people Pottstown needs.

Commentary by Thomas Hylton